

Inclusion: A Matter of Social Justice

How can we create schools that will help students thrive in a diverse society?

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Picture this scenario: *John, a quiet 12-year-old 6th grader at your local middle school, goes through the cafeteria lunch line at noon. After he pays for his food and drink, he starts to put his tray on a table already occupied by other students. One of the boys at the table says, "Go away." John leaves the table and approaches the students at another table. There he is told, "Get out of here." John walks away and puts his tray down at a third table, realizes he's forgotten his straw, and goes back to the lunch line to get one. When he returns to the table where he left his lunch, he finds his tray gone.*

How would you assess this situation? Is there a problem here? If so, whose problem is it? What should the school officials do about this situation? Should John be removed from the school because others don't want to sit with him?

Perhaps your assessment is that the social climate in the school is highly problematic and that something should be done to build community and develop more appropriate social skills among the students. Perhaps you would extend this analysis to issues of race,



class, language, sexual orientation, gender, or ethnicity, questioning what problems might be operating in the school and how these issues could be addressed. Probably you would find the other students' behavior inappropriate, unacceptable for future citizens of a global community.

What if I told you that John is a

student with a wonderful sense of humor, a love of mystery books, an impressive golf swing, and also, by the way, Down syndrome? Would your analysis change? Would you now see the situation differently? Would you say, "Oh, he's special ed!" Might you conclude, as did the hearing officer at John's due-process hearing on inclusion, "Well, this behavior shows conclusively that inclusion doesn't work and that John should be in a special school with others like him where he won't be treated like that"?

The above story is true. John is an amazing golfer, and he does have Down syndrome. And the hearing officer did issue that outrageous exclusionary statement.

This situation raises other questions. If the students treat John this way, how do they respond to the girl who is overweight, the boy with severe

acne, the student who has two lesbian mothers, or the girl who just arrived from Cambodia with limited English skills?

Do we believe that students at this school are welcoming and accepting of all forms of diversity—except disability—and that this issue is only about special education? Or does this

story help us think about the ways in which schools both mirror the broader society and create it? How might we use the story of John's mistreatment to think about the policies, practices, and norms in our schools that encourage or impede positive responses to difference?

Dentists often give patients a red "disclosing tablet" to help them see where their tooth brushing is still inadequate. We can use John's presence as the disclosing tablet of our schools. We can

people need to thrive in a diverse society? Removing John from his middle school will not teach his classmates understanding, generosity of spirit, or any of the skills that they will need to successfully work, play, and interact with the wide range of people they will encounter in their lives. Removing John will not teach students to be active allies to those who are experiencing discrimination or oppression.



view John's school experiences as indicators of imperfections in our schools' curriculum, pedagogy, social climate, and teacher preparation—a needs assessment and a progress report on the road to creating inclusive schools and an inclusive world (Sapon-Shevin, 1996).

John's story is a telling indication that inclusion is not about disability, nor is it only about schools. Inclusion is about social justice. Inclusion demands that we ask, What kind of a world do we want to create and how should we educate students for that world? What kinds of skills and commitments do

Lessons for Inclusive Schools

Inclusive classrooms can teach us important lessons that go far beyond individual students and specific settings and help us create the inclusive, democratic society that we envision for our students and society. How can we realize this vision? Here are four ways.

Challenge Exclusion

"You can't be in our group!" "Let's not let Lilly be on our team/in our club/at our party." "You're not my friend—I don't play with people like you." Most adults have experienced exclusion at

some point on the basis of race, age, sex, family background, class, sexual orientation, religion, language, or physical characteristics. The list goes on and on. Exclusion, however, is not about race or language or gender—or any other difference. Rather, the culture of exclusion posits that isolating and marginalizing the stranger, the outlier, is appropriate, acceptable, and sometimes even laudatory. Exclusion is not about difference; it is about our responses to difference.

Inclusive classrooms can help us challenge practices of exclusion. In an extensive research project, classroom teachers implemented Paley's inclusive rule from her book, *You Can't Say You Can't Play* (1992), and documented the consequences (Sapon-Shevin, Dobbelaere, Corrigan, Goodman, & Mastin, 1998). Not only did students learn active ways to include other students in games and activities, but, more important, issues of inclusion and exclusion became topics for discussion: "Let's talk about what happened today during free play when Matthew wanted to join the girls in the housekeeping corner." "What shall we do about the contradiction between your right to choose whom you play with and other students feeling left out and sad?" "What should you do if you can tell that someone wants to play with you but doesn't know how to ask, or asks inappropriately?"

Many teachers hesitate to initiate such discussions because they fear making issues of exclusion worse. They hope that by not talking about the way children are treating Larissa, somehow the problem will go away. Or they fear that they lack the skills or the classroom norms for such a discussion. These concerns are genuine and worthy of our attention, but if we wait until everyone feels "ready" to address them, we may wait a very long time. Failing to address what all the students have already

observed communicates that exclusion is inevitable. Even imperfect attempts at challenging exclusion can communicate that the way in which we treat one another matters and that doing so in the classroom is a priority worthy of our time and attention.

Deal with Teasing and Bullying

Teasing and harassment are issues far broader than disability. We need not wait for our schools to experience shootings and murder, such as those at Columbine, to respond seriously to the ways in which students can become harassed, marginalized, and excluded.

In the children's book *Chrysanthemum* (Henkes, 1991), students tease Chrysanthemum about her name. The first teacher, Mrs. Chud, tells the children to put their heads down and she attempts to ignore the behavior, which, not surprisingly, escalates. The second teacher, Mrs. Twinkle, not only notices the students' teasing, but also inquires about it and responds to the teasers in a thoughtful, productive—and non-punitive—way.

One important principle for dealing with teasing and harassment is for teachers to respond to insults or injuries that occur in public with an explicitly educational and public response—for example, “What you said is harassment on the basis of race/sexual orientation/physical appearance, and here at Woodrow High School, we treat all students with respect.”¹

Teachers of young children rarely need convincing that the social climate of the classroom is crucial to students' development and learning. Teachers of older students often feel constrained by curriculums that choke out time for attending to the classroom's social climate. At a time when state standards and testing are impairing teachers' ability to focus on what matters most to their students, we need to support teachers' attention to teasing and

bullying. Creating students who can pass tests but who treat one another cruelly or indifferently is not a formula for successful schooling or a democratic society.

Try Other Perspectives

In *Hey, Little Ant* (Hoose & Hoose, 1998), recently translated into Spanish (Hoose & Hoose, 2003), a boy threatens to squash an ant flat. The ant asks, “If you were me and I were you, what

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would you want me to do?” The illustration shows an enormous ant and a very tiny little boy.

The story sparks class discussions of ways in which students have treated others and been treated by others on the basis of differences in size, identity, or other characteristics (Sapon-Shevin, 1999). With older students, such discussions can center on ways in which groups within the community treat one another, including those in different neighborhoods, gangs, or racial and ethnic groups (see www.heylittleant.com).

Recent world events provide opportunities to discuss new perspectives. What makes someone our “enemy”? What makes someone “dangerous”? What can we tell by looking at someone? What can't we tell? What happens when we act from a very limited perspective? What can we learn by reaching across perceived borders of difference? Can you be friends with someone in kindergarten if you're in 4th grade? What about differences in skin

color? Language? Family background? What do we lose and gain by changing our lenses and perceptions?

Foster Courage, Challenge Oppression

Bob Blue's song “Courage” (1990) tells the story of a girl who witnesses the exclusion of a classmate, Diane. She makes connections between Diane's exclusion and recent social studies lessons about “gas chambers, bombers, and guns in Auschwitz, Japan, and My Lai” and about the fact that many stood by silently. At the end of the song she says,

I promise to do what I can
to not let it happen again.
To care for all women and men,
I'll start by inviting Diane.

Students respond to this song powerfully, more than eager to discuss their own experiences of exclusion and their responses. Students can and do respond with courage to exclusion and bullying. One mother told me that when students were bullying a boy on the bus, her 7-year-old daughter left her seat to sit with the target. She told the other students, “Stop. That's not nice.” We can all emulate this young girl's courage.

Everyone needs strategies for responding with courage to oppressive language and behavior, and bringing students, parents, teachers, and administrators into a dialogue on these strategies can strengthen our resolve.

We can start by examining humor. Almost everyone has been told a joke that he or she found offensive or singularly “unfunny.” Did he or she say something in response? Why or why not? Is it easier to say something if the person is your friend, or does that make it harder? What are the possible or real consequences of saying, “I don't think that's funny” or “I don't like jokes that make fun of people with AIDS”? What can you say or do if the joke teller is your

parent, your teacher, a popular student in the class, your boss? Are there funny jokes that don't make fun of people? What are some possible responses to oppressive humor?

Other questions to explore together include

- When have you interrupted or challenged oppressive language or behavior about race, gender, or disability?

- When didn't you interrupt or challenge it?

- What made you able to challenge it? What stood in your way?

- What can you do when you see someone excluded?

- What can you say if someone is teasing someone else?

- When you hear others speaking from a limited perspective, do you have strategies for broadening the discussion?

- What more would you need to know to be an effective ally to those experiencing discrimination?

Teachers can model how to challenge oppressive statements. After the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center, a 5th grade boy in one classroom announced, "I think all Muslims should be sent back to their countries because they're all terrorists." The teacher, rather than attacking the boy, engaged the class in a discussion. "Hmmm," she said. "How many of you remember the Oklahoma City bombing?" Many students raised their hands. "And who turned out to be responsible for that?" she asked. "Timothy McVeigh," the students responded. "Then I wonder if we should send all people of *his* religion away because they might be dangerous terrorists." The students were shocked and protested: "Of course not." "That was about him, not about his religion." "I'm sure that is not what they taught him in church." The teacher's challenge to one student's dangerously problematic statement converted it into a powerful lesson about social justice.

Active Allies of Social Justice

Students in inclusive classrooms are learning to ask, "What do we have to think about on this field trip to make sure that it's physically accessible for all the kids in our class?" and "How shall we plan for the class party so that everyone has something to eat, given allergies and religious dietary limitations?" I have seen students in inclusive settings learn to be both comfortable and sophisticated in understanding differences and becoming active allies on behalf of other students. These ques-

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tions can extend beyond the classroom: How can students confront racism in their community, English-only legislation, sexual harassment in the workplace, homophobic advertising or representation? Inclusive classrooms can be places in which students learn to take powerful stances against oppression of many kinds, recognizing their own agency and power to change the world (Sapon-Shevin, 1999).

If we move beyond seeing inclusion as a special education concern, beyond seeing those to be included as those with disabilities, then we have the potential to challenge and transform far more within our schools and society. We need to question the words we use: Isn't what we call *special education* actually *segregated education* for many students? Why are only some students included in inclusive classrooms? What about making a commitment that all students be included, renaming *inclusive classrooms* simply *classrooms*, or *standard practice* (Sapon-Shevin, 2001)?

When one person is oppressed, no one

is free. When one student is not a full participant in his or her school community, then we are all at risk. By embracing inclusion as a model of social justice, we can create a world fit for us all. ■

The Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network of Colorado has useful information about harassment and school climate (www.glsenco.org; click Resources, then Educators).

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